

Naxalbari Politics: A Feminist Narrative

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Using the method of a historical non-linear narrative, a woman participant in the Naxalbari/Naxalite movement of the late 1960s/early 1970s recounts a number of incidents from those tumultuous days from a feminist perspective. For the then member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) those events suggest that the history of the movement would have been different had the feminist question of equality been dealt with more objectively.

Several times, while composing this piece, I debated whether it would be better not to do so. With such critical reflections one always runs the risk of isolation; and who wants to be isolated? Though friends had told me to go ahead, there was something inside that had held me back. Through a long period of struggle with myself, I realised that it was imperative to write what follows.

I had embraced Naxalbari politics in my early youth; and in my mature years today, I still feel no regret for having done so. This politics had instilled in me the courage to call a spade a spade. All that I had experienced, and all that I had learnt then, still inspires me to explore new modes of being and to discover yet more paths. Whenever I am witness to a struggle, I still feel like joining it. I had become a part of so many movements – the women's movement, the students' movement and the peasants' movement. Today I speak out forcefully against violence perpetrated in the name of religion, just as that young girl of the 1970s would have done. Although, many young people are doing good work beyond the framework of our movement, yet, for me, this has been the gift of my politics.

All the respect and love I get from relatives, friends, and so many others is because of the fact that I marched in step with that politics once upon a time. Still, emotion and reason must be reconciled after a point.

My political party had grown out of our own social milieu. A party is not just a frame; it is a platform for people of various kinds to come together. And we were creatures of this very socio-economic reality. It is impossible for a person to hold back all negative traits and bring in only the good. Everyone carries both good and evil traits. Anyway, what I want to say is that moves to condemn our party as "evil" were typical of those with feudal and patriarchal values, be they men or women. And in any case, even the very concepts of "good" and "evil" are relative. Those who genuinely wish to dismantle exploitative social structures also challenge their own old structures of belief. That is why they are the vanguard of society. If the very edifice of the nation state is to be brought down, then this work must begin at its very foundation – this may have been a declared aim, but it was not achieved in reality. Tearing out the foundations is not a matter of just killing off a handful of landowners and landlords, for they are the mere pillars of the nation. It means tearing out the very patterns of thought; and that is a long process that must be carried out in a sustained manner. This political party had launched itself with genuine questions, which could never be answered with any short-cut approaches. A long-term war had been declared, yet simultaneously, a time limit had also been set. We have lost so many lives in our haste for short-term success. And not just workers,

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leaders too have had to die. Yet it was so important for these selfless and extremely courageous people to have carried on living in our society.

Another regret is that my party had never considered seriously, far less taken any stand whatsoever, on women's liberation. Later, when I began to publish *Khoj Ekhon*, a feminist little magazine, my political friends were still saying, "Women will automatically become free when society is liberated". The point is that the women's liberation movement or the movement for national identity are not divorced from the struggle to reform society; both must continue simultaneously. Today, many have understood this at least partially, if not completely. This piece is dedicated to those women of the next generation who will play an active role in political struggles, not just for the liberation of humankind in general, but also for the liberation of women in particular. In spite of all the bloodshed, disappointments and failures, I still dream of a liberated society where some day women will claim half the sky.

1

There are several folds to a story, several layers underlying many incidents. If I do not unravel some of these layers, the significance of the main story will remain out of bounds. Four decades ago I had got involved in a tumultuous movement. As a witness to that, as a human being and especially as a woman, I hold certain perceptions. To adequately translate those perceptions into words, I will have to briefly touch upon my past before the actual story began – why, at that age, I got involved in such a sweeping movement. Without such a prelude the essence will elude the readers.

In the Family

There I was, just an ordinary girl. This person need not have been me; it could have been any girl. So let's hear the testimony of this girl.

Since my childhood I have seen several festivals being observed and celebrated in our house. And the centre of attention during these festivals would always be my brothers, uncles and other prominent male "human beings". Among the many festivals was the 'Chatu Oranor Parbo'. 'Pishima', my paternal aunt, was amazingly beautiful; she had kept house for her husband for barely a year before being widowed, and had then taken shelter with her brothers' families. She was a stickler for all dos and don'ts. Though deprived and left out of everything, she would still ensure that she participated on festive occasions. Why this was so, I was to understand later.

Anyway, she would give all the boys 'chatu' (barley) in one hand and ash in the other and say, "Go to the corner of the road and scatter the ash in the name of your enemies and the chatu in the name of your friends". One of my cousins was of my age. Spotting the ash and barley in his hands I would start demanding, "Give it to me, I'll scatter it for my friends and enemies". In her east Bengali dialect, pishima would comment, "Where will friends and enemies suddenly appear from for girls? Do you think girls are human beings?". Everyone would laugh at this, and I found that everybody agreed with her. I would feel very small compared to my brothers. Ashamed and insulted, my eyes would

fill with tears and I would cry silently and secretly. Even later in life I would cringe at the discrimination in every aspect of life – be it eating habits, education, freedom of movement. In my own way I protested once in a while, but not a brick on the wall of "don'ts" was affected by it. I always thought that something needed to be done about this.

I used to hear about my maternal uncles from my mother (they were leftists) and they seemed different. Disregarding the set regimen of my father and my paternal uncles, I have been a part of many left processions without even understanding the difference between the right and the left. I have walked hand in hand with the people of the refugee colonies when they demanded government relief (GR). Even though I was young, I involved myself in activities like this purely because I felt that as a girl I had to go out and do something. The festering wounds of humiliation experienced since childhood never let me be at peace. Exactly at the time when I was stepping into adulthood, something happened in north Bengal. Everyone was talking about it. I saw some of my dear friends provoked by and agitated over this incident. I heard so many new words and phrases – "We must strike against the revisionists", "Imperialists and socialist imperialists must be finished", etc. These were unfamiliar phrases for me; even so, I liked the feel of these words. A variety of little magazines and pamphlets began to come into our hands. We began to feel different as we read them. We read about the women of the working class – this was the first time I observed that people were thinking about women. Several new stories and songs and poems were being composed. I felt I had found my way at last. And gradually I became more and more involved in the "most worthwhile cause" of that time.

Part of the Movement

Here, I must clarify it is not my intention to write about either the history of this movement or about my own political life. I am trying to explain why I or other women like me from middle class backgrounds joined this movement. Was it merely going with the flow and tide of the time, or was it the influence of a hero, or was it something completely different? Perhaps it was in search of that "something different" that we women associated ourselves with this movement.

1970; the city was in tumult. Those in the movement were asking more and more questions – each question was so justified that there was no possibility of any doubt or scepticism in anyone's mind. But what was missing was the opportunity for people to think things through: instead, the leaders themselves promptly decided on how to go about things. Schools were burned down, so were colleges; statues were beheaded in parks – and we too lost the right to hold up our heads. This line of action that the party (the Communist Party of India – Marxist-Leninist or CPI-ML) had chosen, ultimately left no room for women's decision-making. As workers in this movement we certainly cannot shrug off the responsibility of what happened, but did we really have any major role to play?

We had once tried to define a role for ourselves independently. I cannot resist the urge to elaborate on that particular incident. There was no directive as to what we should be doing. We were

functioning as couriers, but we wanted to play an active part in the movement. Our male counterparts were doing such a variety of things. We were suffering from a great sense of ignominy. Then we took the decision, ourselves, on an “action” in a school. Only then would the “enemy” identify us as its enemy. In 1970, a certain school in Hooghly was going to mark the centenary of both Gandhi and Lenin on the same occasion. We identified this particular day as the day of our “action”. One of my young colleagues, who studied in that very school, was given the responsibility of making a speech. We briefed her on the content – “It is not possible to mark the birth anniversaries of Lenin and Gandhi on the same occasion. How is it that those who looked upon Lenin as their arch enemy during his lifetime are suddenly looking up to him as an idol and offering obeisance now that he is dead. They have no right to mark this birthday, etc, etc...”

Another of the girls was told to recite the poem *Lenin*. We would start our “action” as the programme was on. Everything was finalised. We drew portraits of Mao Ze Dong and wrote slogans in every room – the library, the classrooms, even in the school office. For thus bringing our activities and intentions to the notice of the local party, we were much criticised for working independently. Even more depressing was the fact that despite such a major “action”, there was no coverage in any paper, be it revolutionary or reactionary. But the plan of “action” itself – particularly the speech and our drawings and slogans in every room – was in no way devoid of risk.

Patriarchal Party Leadership?

So many women joined the movement, but on the party’s part there was no actual directive as to what their role was expected to be. Many commented that even in the case of the men, there were no specific directives. For the sake of argument this is perfectly true, but the party leadership was male and can it be denied that their policies would automatically tend to be patriarchal?

“When it comes to revolution, no contribution is too negligible”; therefore, we were asked to offer shelter to revolutionaries, give them tea, and carry letters and documents from one place to another. And we had one more responsibility. This was to undergo training as nurses, so that we could tend to our injured male comrades and nurse them back to health. Thanks to our care, the party could regain its comrades because the police would not usually suspect a woman. We began to feel very insignificant. Was there really much difference between my pishima and these people? If there wasn’t, then what was the point in continuing with them? I might as well have stayed at home as the docile, well-behaved girl of the family. These thoughts immediately sparked a struggle within me. I had to try and forge a path for myself.

Around this time, severe police atrocities were inflicted upon the workers of the movement. It was a greatly distressing phase. Colleagues we knew and colleagues we did not know were being arrested, getting shot at and killed, and all we could do was feel wretched and helpless. Precisely at this time my name, and the names of several other women, found their way to the police. The enemy had honoured us with the status of being their “enemy”. I won’t deny that being thus identified as an “enemy” brought a sense of relief rather than produce a sense of fear – women could

have enemies after all. Even though the party had issued no such definite directive, women too had left their homes for good, and gone to work as whole timers in the villages. Women such as Nirmala Krishnamurti, Sampurna, Saraswati Amma and many others had fought shoulder to shoulder with men in the armed struggles of Andhra Pradesh and had become martyrs to the cause. Many had courted arrest. When my name was given to the police, I too had to leave home. I decided that I would go to the villages. But where? Exactly at this time Dronacharya Ghosh (Dron) sent out a call to us to come and work amongst women peasants. All my resentment towards the party evaporated. One dark night I arrived in the village.

The Village

At present, the economic condition of farmers is somewhat better than what it was then. I am fully aware of what I am saying. But when we were in the movement, it was doubtful whether they managed to have even one, let alone two, square meals a day. And by meal, I mean a few handfuls of watery rice. There were no vegetables of any sort to go with it. During my stay in the village, over and above the constant ache of hunger, I craved to eat potatoes. But never mind that. Day after day entire families, even tiny little children, were starving; and on the few days that something could be procured, they had to give people like us a share. I would feel the injustice of this, but then hurriedly told myself, “I could easily have stayed comfortably at home. Instead I have come here to help them free themselves from this situation.” Comforting myself with such thoughts, I never had any hesitation in dipping my hand into the vessel and scooping up the few handfuls of watery rice within.

After a few days, Dron, the party leader in that region, told me that there were a number of militant women present in the area. He wanted me to form a squad with them that would work towards annihilating the ‘jotedar’. The leadership had ordained this; even so I ventured hesitantly, “First, they need to become politically aware, after that they themselves can decide what needs to be done. Why should we impose any ideas...” Dron was irritated by my remarks, and said, “Where is the question of imposing anything? And do you think that they are not politically aware? Be careful about one thing: don’t bring your middle-class instinct for self-preservation into their midst.” Dron then seemed a stranger to me. I couldn’t tell him, “This idea of annihilation has been forcibly imposed on me as well”. A 19-year-old girl brimming with love received a massive jolt on that day. There was no option but to shed tears of shame and hurt. After so many years, I feel if I had courageously gone against this idea of “annihilation”, we would not have had to suffer the untimely loss of people such as Dron.

From the next day, every evening saw us meeting with a few women for political discussions in dim light. I read out the writings of Mao Ze Dong and Charu Majumdar, told them stories about Russia and China and sang them songs. After a long day of strenuous labour they would tell me, “Never mind all those political matters, we are feeling sleepy. Instead sing us some songs that will put us to sleep.” Dron was not very happy with the progress I was making. When he met with others in the evening to discuss political issues or read aloud from books, I would

pay careful attention to what he read, to what was being discussed in an attempt to find out where I was falling short. We were introduced to a variety of new terminology at that time (it will obviously figure in my writing). One such phrase was, “We must set an example”; so even I was expected to set one. Setting an example meant putting together a women’s squad which would terminate the class enemies – the enemy here meant the local jotedar. In my mind there was a sense of excitement. We were the first women’s squad in Hooghly district; we were about to finish off a jotedar. My compatriots were all encouraging me. I was dreaming of setting an example.

Action/Annihilation

I kept chalking out plans of action – how many people would there be in the squad, who would be the squad leader, what would be the appropriate time for annihilation (I use this word on purpose since, in the villages I visited in that region during that period, all the peasants – whether men or women – were using such words). I couldn’t sleep at night. I was steeling myself for the forthcoming. The house that was my shelter in the village belonged to landless santhals. One of the girls of the household used to study in a nearby missionary school, and stay in the school’s hostel on its charity programme. In the area, I was introduced as her friend. They were four sisters and one brother. Their mother was also there. The oldest sister, along with her three children, had been abandoned by her husband. She was always withdrawn. The next sister worked as a farmhand on the jotedar’s land and she was, to us, quite militant. The third one was my friend who was quite citybred in her habits and manners. The youngest was quite small, and would pluck unripe papayas from the jotedar’s land where her elder sister worked and have them with some salt, sharing both with me. Plagued as we were by pangs of hunger, this was nothing short of nectar. I will never forget her.

I had decided for myself that I would appoint the second sister as the squad leader and give her all the responsibility – she would choose who would be in the squad, the time of “action”, etc. (This is what is known as “class dependence”).

We met for a discussion at night where I asked her to speak. She started off, “We have been suffering for generations. We are the ones who slog in the fields to feed the people of this country. But in exchange we get hunger and humiliation. And if we cannot get rid of those who are responsible for this situation, we will never find a release from this. We must remove them...” My friend interrupted at this point and asked, “How do you propose to get rid of them? By killing them?” “Killing who? Dadu?” she asked (the village jotedar was referred to as Dadu, or grandfather, by my friend and her siblings). “Tell me, can you really find it in you to kill him?”

The older one remained silent for a bit and then replied, “They are rich, they are oppressors, it is because of them that we have to go through such hardship – there is no denying that, is there?”

My friend said, “If you finish off Dadu, doesn’t he have a son? He will then become the owner of all the land and property. And if you kill him off too, will that really bring an end to all our suffering?” After this, I think my friend wished to strike out at me.

But she addressed her sister, “Look Mejdi, your sufferings are your own, nobody else can come and make you aware of them. Don’t start out on something which has been instigated by someone else. And those who are instigating you, they will leave. Will you be able to handle the repercussions after that?” In the face of such a direct attack, I could find no words to speak. I thought to myself, jotedars are being terminated in so many places. Do the people there also think like my friend, that they have been incited by others? Ultimately I came to the conclusion that it was I who lacked political awareness.

That night my friend who was lying beside me said, “You were very hurt by my comments, weren’t you? But you know that in a few days I’m getting married – why do you want to put a stop to that? Don’t mind what I’m going to say now, but this “action” of yours, which aims to help us, is actually going to bring about more problems for us. I can’t speak for the men, but let me tell you one thing, we women cannot go around and kill someone just like that.” I said, “Why just like that?” She stopped me in my tracks and asked, “Okay, tell me truthfully – do you think you will actually be able to kill someone?” I could not answer her that day, but now I won’t lie. I was never comfortable with the idea of such annihilation action. That’s why it was not proving possible for me to set an example.

I will not narrate here all the events as they occurred chronologically. There is no need for that. This is because much has been written about this particular movement – the terror that was unleashed by the state on those associated with it, the police atrocities – and several other aspects too have been dealt with extensively. The attempt here is to put forward what has remained outside the purview of discussion for a number of reasons – the debates, the criticism, the falling out between friends, etc.

‘One with the Masses’

When I first arrived in the village I did not have to roam around under cover of darkness. According to the collective decision of the girls of the house where I had taken shelter, I went about with them freely in broad daylight even though the party had decreed otherwise. My friend had said, “A friend from our boarding has come for my wedding, why should she be hiding from people?” One day, the jotedar caught sight of me and asked my friend, “Where did you find this fair girl (compared to their complexion, I was indeed fair)? My child, what is your name?” My friend came forward and said, “We are classmates, she stays in our hostel. She’s come for my wedding. Her name is...”

Is this what is meant by the public’s creative instinct? I was overwhelmed. My reliance on her increased even more.

Taking advantage of being able to move about freely, I visited my friend’s relatives’ houses in other villages, and got to meet a lot of people. I started staying with them occasionally as well, and began discussions on political issues. Everybody spoke about wanting release from the authoritarian rule they were under, but nobody spoke of “annihilation”. I found myself in a huge dilemma. Was Dron actually right then? Had I injected my middle class instinct for self-preservation into them?

I was involved in the process of becoming “one with the masses”, of losing “one’s class identity” just as Mao Ze Dong had

said to be “like fishes in water”. I was noticing that the women also had begun to trust me. They were sharing their joys and sorrows with me. Internally, I felt extremely happy. Dron had gone away from the village on some party work. When he returned, I would say to him, “Look, how I have progressed”.

At just such a moment I was forced to leave that village. Dron and two others (one, a farmer and the other a city schoolteacher) had been caught while trying to implement an “action”. There was no question of returning home. Nor did I have any idea of where I could go. I could not accept that Dron had been arrested. If we came upon a jotedar suddenly, were we to finish him off? I thought to myself, if farmers were incensed enough to finish off a class enemy, why then would those same farmers tell on those who had actually helped in finishing their enemies, as they had told on Dron? I expressed this to some people. But who would listen to anything I had to say? Instead people began to comment that I was unable to accept Dron’s arrest due to personal reasons. Today I realise how devoid of humanity my colleagues had been, my compatriots who had put their life on the line and declared war on the State.

2

Dron had always been a good poet. Even before he entered politics. My elder brother and others used to tease me often – for Dron revolution and you are synonymous. He was very romantic; he used to love the vision of him and me fighting side by side with guns in our hands for the sake of revolution. Perhaps the notion of two people becoming intimate went against his idea of revolution.

We used to live with a santhal family in a village; and we used to share one room between Dron, me, the daughter of that family, her lover and a little girl. One night, Dron was reading by the light of a ‘kupi’ (lamp) in one corner of the room; I had lain down already. After a point of time, the daughter of the family and her lover started to make love to each other. Cutting right through my pretence of being asleep, a powerful sense of their union flooded my veins. At that moment, I, too, felt like having Dron close to me. I wanted Dron to come and kiss me on my lips. I knew that Dron too was aware of their union. I thought Dron would surely now come near me. Yes, Dron did; he called me softly. Without opening my eyes, I waited silently for his touch. “Come, let us read *Chiner Krishaker Sreni Bishleshon (Class Analysis of the Chinese Peasantry)*.” I could have cried, so much resentment and anguish did I feel at that moment. I told myself I would not be part of the revolutionary movement from the next day. I somehow managed to get up and start reading. Dron, I saw, had a completely detached expression on his face. Is this the Dron who had fled jail and taken all kinds of risks and come to our house just to see me once? When I had finished reading and was about to go to bed, I thought, perhaps he had decided not to give in to individual desire in order to prioritise the revolution.

When I woke up in the morning, I saw Dron studying. Instead of going near him, I sat down with a book in one corner. Dron called out to me: “Can you wash this shirt of mine?” he asked. “Such a dirty shirt; will it look clean even after a wash?”, I responded. He replied: “Maybe not, but at least I will be able to

carry the scent of your love around with me.” He loves me so much? I simply could not reconcile this Dron with the Dron of the previous evening. What infinite love lay reflected in those beautiful eyes of his! Does one really have to stifle one’s natural sexual desires in order to effect a revolution? This thought had crossed my mind then, even though I had not quite been able to enunciate it as clearly.

Dron had managed to control his desire; and I had thought of Dron as great and myself as “petit bourgeois” – quite unworthy of the revolution.

Dron left soon after this. Before leaving, he held both my hands and said, “I’ll always be by your side. Don’t ever move away from the revolution. I won’t be able to take it if I learn you have forsaken the revolution.” I promised him I never would. He left. I had never imagined I would never see him again.

3

Those were terrible days. Like most others in the movement, I had no shelter and was staying anywhere and everywhere. I was toying with the idea of quitting politics. But then I still cherished the dream that by 1975, India would be free and all those languishing in jail would be released. Including Dron. We were all in a kind of a trance and believed in this heart and soul. It was in such faith that so many young boys and girls had sacrificed their lives. Under such circumstances, and in a cruel encounter with the jail security forces on February 7, 1972, Dron sacrificed his life to the dream of a free India. He believed with all his heart that India would truly be free in 1975; and that we would all be together again. In his last letter he wrote, “When it comes to freedom, there are but two options. Either the general public will set us free or we will break free ourselves. And this will be before 1975.”

Dron’s death came as a tremendous blow for me. I decided that I would move far, far away from politics. This was because I found that several questions regarding our style of politics were beginning to bother me. And then of course, there was the shock of the death of a loved one. But with whom could I share this? If I did, immediately there was the fear of being stamped with a variety of labels (revisionist, reactionary). At that time I desperately wanted to be with my comrades so that I could calm my inner restlessness. I could do away with the doubts and suspicions I had regarding the party, and above all, I could alleviate the burden I was carrying by letting out the sobs that had welled up in my throat. But I found no one. I got in touch with my mother. With her, I did not have to say a word; she pulled me to her breast and enfolded me in her arms. And there was Dron’s father. With great passion, he exclaimed, “You are the one who will make Dron’s dream a reality”. My burden of sorrow lightened considerably. I decided I would not return home. I had left home for the sake of politics, and I could not now return there. I convinced myself that the party would rectify its flaws and we would achieve our aspired goal without fail.

Facing Patriarchy Again

When they heard that I was thinking of leaving politics, my comrades came to visit me. They spoke about taking revenge for the deaths of our martyr comrades. Though by now I had

decided for myself that I would not return home, it felt good to see them all again.

Roaming from the slum-dwellings of labourers to other shelters in the city, I found myself getting involved once more. All around us people were getting arrested. Police atrocities on our party knew no bounds. Saroj Dutta had already martyred himself. On July 27, 1972 Charu Mazumdar too became a martyr. The party was on the brink of collapse. Practically everyone was in jail. A few of us were moving around like fugitives spread out in different directions. At this point, a new leader emerged to totally revamp the party. A fresh phase began.

There was no new ideology. No specific planning. Everybody had started suspecting everybody else, mistrusting each other. My role at that time was to inspire others as a martyr's wife. Dron's death had apparently given me a new "status" within the party. And their vibes made it obvious that I was to have no other relationship in my life. No one was able to accept my second relationship. All sorts of comments were passed, even specific excerpts from Dron's letters were quoted by some who said, "This is why he had said such-and-such thing" (I don't enjoy talking about all this; yet, I am writing about it to show the kind of mindset they had). I got very upset and said, "Do you want to hark back to the pre-Vidyasagar era?" I realised after such a long time why Vidyasagar's statues had been destroyed. My comrades were livid at this. But after that outburst, no one tried to harass me by bringing up the topic.

Today when the religious intolerance of people pains me, I cannot but recall that we too had blindly adhered to certain directives for the sake of being loyal. We were told, "Don't ask why", it is because "our respected leader" has said so. "India would truly be free in 1975", and a hundred other things would happen because the "respected leader" had said so. If a chosen one was the "respected leader", then what about the rest? Later, of course certain people got "knighted" as "party leader", "beloved leader", etc.

"Class dependence" meant depending on the working classes – this much I had understood by then. And I had also been made to understand that peasants and workers were not ordinary people – they had acquired a special stature. So if a woman, even while taking shelter with a peasant or a worker, was forced to keep awake night after night by his lecherous behaviour, one could not complain. We would be told, "You are losing your capacity to view things from the class perspective, comrade". This is from my personal experience. It will demonstrate very clearly what an extremely mechanical response there was from the comrades in the face of a heartrending experience.

Dangerous Times

Once I was supposed to accompany a farmer comrade to a village in 24 Paraganas. He was to meet me in front of a shop at the Barasat bus stand at 10 in the morning. When I reached at the appointed time, I could not spot him. I thought, perhaps he was a bit late and would arrive soon. It struck 11 and he had still not come. I went into a sweet shop and whiled away some time with a few sweets and water. After another half an hour, he still had not turned up. I was wondering whether to leave or not when a youth came up to me and said, "...-da is calling you". I followed

him to a room. There I found quite a prosperous, leader-like type of person seated on a chair with a bunch of sycophants surrounding him. Who was I, why was I here – they kept asking me these sort of questions.

First, I gave vague, evasive answers. When they started making crude remarks about me, I objected. I had with me my bag which contained the party newspaper and a few political books. I knew that they would want to look into my bag soon. So I clearly told them, "I am involved with the Naxalbari movement. I am carrying books of a political nature and have nothing to do with any other obscene business." At this, the leader-looking man addressed me in a belittling manner and said, "That's not what your compatriot said". I was frightened by the knowledge that my comrade had fallen into their clutches, but I thought to myself that regardless of what happened to me, he had to be rescued. I started pleading with them, "Let him go. Turn me in to the police instead." I felt extremely distressed when they showed me a paper on which was written (the writing was theirs, the crooked signature at the bottom was my comrade's) "Please let me go. These men have forced me to join their party. I will never involve myself in such activities again." They had not brought us into the same room. I could hear my comrade's voice from the adjoining room. After a short while the leader said, "We've let your fellow go. You people can stay with anyone at night. Will you spend the night with me today?" His hangers-on dissolved into fits of laughter. My throat was absolutely parched. On the surface, I took on the façade of courage and said, "Your appearance tells me that you cannot bring yourself to do such a thing." "How much do you know of me, huh..." he decorated me with various epithets. Extracting the political papers from my bag, I desperately started to say to them, "We are doing nothing wrong. We have chosen this path to free India from exploitation." With repulsive mockery, they responded, "Quite right. First free yourself from our hands, then you can think of freeing India."

I thought to myself, there is no escape now. And I was worried about my comrade – they could well be pretending that they had let him go, while in actuality they may even have made him disappear? Seeing that I had fallen silent, the leader said, "There's a good girl". Then he told his followers, "All of you go home except such-and-such, who is to guard her. In the meanwhile, I'll go and have my food. Then we will ..." And again there was that wave of laughter.

When I think back to those frightful days of the 1970s, I feel that perhaps I've watched these scenes in some film, or read about them in some book, or that they were some sort of nightmare.

What transpired after this was exactly like something out of a film. I had not yet looked at the person who was to keep an eye on me until then. Now I did. Without looking at me he said, "You run away from here, I'll show you the route". I said to him, "Why would you do this? You are on their side". He said, "Just do as I tell you. Follow me". The front door remained closed. He led me along a narrow dark lane which was more like a tunnel. I don't know how much we walked. Finally we came upon a different bus stand. He said something to the conductor, then he seated me in the bus and got down. As he got off, I asked him, "Who are you? Now you will get into trouble". Succinctly he told me that he had once been one of us. Frightened by the extreme torture that

was unleashed on us, he switched sides. He reassured me, "Don't worry about me. I'll manage."

I got off the bus at a certain stop in Calcutta and went to one of my shelters. As soon as I got there, I fainted. Soon I was suffering from high fever and then chicken pox. The couple that owned the shelter were very fond of me. They nursed me back to health. After this I got in touch with the party and informed them of my illness, and the terrifying experience I had been through on that day. My comrades did not pay very much attention to what I was saying. They said, "He (my former comrade) has told us everything. How he got caught because you were late. How he managed to get you out of the clutches of those goons and was unable to escape himself. He has told us everything."

I almost screamed out, "He is telling you a pack of lies. That boy who is the witness to what actually happened has probably been killed by them." But they would not believe me for a moment. When I asked, where is the comrade who was supposed to meet me, they replied, "He has gone back to the village. And are you trying to tell us that he has told us lies and that you are coming to us with the truth after all these days?". I even saw the shadow of a mocking smile on some of their faces. I began to cry in shame and humiliation. My leader comrade comforted me, "Don't cry. Instead try and understand why you are making such errors. Do not shift blame on to their class in order to cover up your own faults." I had never understood what "class perspective" was: suddenly, now I did.

After all this I had one source of comfort. I got to know later that the unknown friend who had saved me from that awful experience had not got into trouble, and my comrade who had left me in the lurch and run off, later left politics and apparently took on some other role. My point is that working class people are human beings just like us. It is quite natural to fear for one's own life. We are the ones who have glorified them with a god-like status.

4

I was roaming from shelter to shelter. I have already mentioned that in some shelters (be they of peasants or labourers or middle-class men) I was unable to sleep at night because of the man of the house. But whom could I confide in about this? To the party? That would be stepping from the frying pan into fire. They would probably decree that either I learn to trust more or I "annihilate". And was it always true that the places provided by the party were completely safe? I was unable to share my misgivings with even my women compatriots. I had noticed one thing; there was an essential difference between my point of view and that of other women comrades.

Let me describe one incident that will clarify this. One night a certain male comrade behaved indecently with a woman comrade (in places where we used to stay, men and women used to sleep side by side). That woman complained to the party leadership. A meeting was called to investigate the man's conduct. Practically everyone from the party leadership along with a few of us women gathered at a particular house for the meeting. There was a long drawn out discussion, at the end of which it was decided that whatever the women decreed would be taken as the final verdict. At the very beginning the woman who had been at the

receiving end of this behaviour began to speak. She was trembling with extreme disgust and could utter only one sentence, "The only way to gain peace of mind after such an experience is to annihilate him". The other women comrades were also up in arms. This threat of "annihilation" was articulated repeatedly. Internally I began to feel very nervous. Would I be able to find the strength to put forward a different stand after this? I knew that my expressing a different opinion would not put a stop to this business of "annihilation". But I had to make my feelings known. It was now my turn, everyone was looking at me. I noticed the guilty male comrade also looking at me. I looked away and started to speak, "No man has the right to show disrespect towards a woman. If a male comrade has behaved offensively with a woman comrade, he should definitely be punished severely. But why this talk of "annihilation"? Are we intoxicated with the idea of constantly finishing people off? Let us think of some other punishment to give him." All those present, whether men or women, then retorted, "So what are you saying? That he should get away with this kind of behaviour?".

The anger that was sweltering inside me suddenly burst out and I blurted, "Then there are several others here who should also be finished off". Addressing the male comrades, I said, "All of you, can you put your hands on your hearts and swear that none of you have ever behaved indecently with a female comrade lying by your side?".

All the male comrades fell silent and the women looked at me with such undisguised hatred that it seemed that the first person they wanted to finish off instantly was me. But I had spoken out as a representative of all the women there, because I knew that many of us had had such experiences. A male colleague murmured to me, "Where did you get such courage? Anyhow, you had better be careful from now on."

The guilty comrade's punishment was pronounced after this. He was to work in some village. Only one party member would keep in touch with him. He would never be allowed to come back to the city or make use of any party shelter or "post-box".

Gender-Sensitive Comrades

Let it not be assumed however that this is a generalisation about all my male comrades. That is not at all the case. In fact, it is quite the opposite. After leaving home I had spent years living with them day and night. Finding myself thrown together with them, side by side, I had never thought of them as anything but very good friends. There are many like them, but I find it necessary here to mention two martyr comrades. One is Joydebda (Suniti Modak) and the other is Samshul (Jiten Kundu).

I had stayed with Joydebda at his rented accommodation for days at a time. I did not know that he was in love with me. One day, his wife brought it up in conversation in the presence of Joydebda himself. Joydebda said with perfect honesty, "Yes, I was in love with her. But ever since I heard that she was in a relationship with ---, I withdrew. I can vouch in front of all of you that her touch, or sleeping beside her now does not arouse in me anything but a deep sense of friendship."

Once I was directed to pose as Samshul's wife and stay with him in a shelter. Samshul had received a bullet wound in his leg

in a face-to-face encounter with the police. They were murderously looking for him. The bullet had somehow been extracted. He was unable to walk. A lot of blood had been lost. He urgently needed an injection and the wound needed to be dressed. I knew how to perform these tasks, so the duty fell on my shoulders. I brought him to the shelter in an almost unconscious state. There were three of us there – Samshul, the house-owner and myself. The other members of the house had gone out of town for quite a prolonged period. So there was no problem. As far as the gentleman knew, we were really husband and wife. Expressing his sympathy, the gentleman left for work. Samshul was unconscious. I was giving him the injections and administering medicines every hour. I had cleaned the wound, dressed it and was seated by his side. I was stiff with fear – suppose something untoward was to happen? I was calling out to him repeatedly. His capacity for endurance was very strong. He regained consciousness fully towards dawn. He smiled and said, “If I had got shot in the heart instead of the leg, I wouldn’t have been able to enjoy the loving care of my wife.” I said, “If my husband were to hear you say this, he would let you have it”. He laughed. It took more than a month for Samshul to return to his normal health. We lived together for that length of time. When the owner of the house was around we behaved just like any other married couple. We lay side by side on the same bed day after day but never once did he ever behave indecently with me. After this, I saw Samshul only twice. On July 2, 1974, Jitu (Samshul), Mohan and Ramshankar were killed in a police encounter.

Questions

In 1970-71, the movement reached its peak. Immediately the state unleashed its atrocities. In 1972 the party received a dreadful blow. In 1973 an attempt was made to revive the party, but the cracks remained. In two or three places, there were fresh cases of annihilating the jotedars and taking possession of their arms. But such action remained limited and could not spread much.

Gradually, nearly everyone got arrested. A large number of women were also behind bars. Police atrocities on those in jail

began to cross all limits. We had declared war against the State. A generation of young boys and girls had dedicated the most precious years of their lives to this cause. There was no shirking from it. Many people ask, how did you manage in jail? How much did the police torment you? These questions are meaningless. We had vowed to change a particular situation. To expect that those who were equally adamant in continuing that situation would – after putting us all in jail – ask their forces to treat us like their own children, or entertain us with the best of food and drink, would have been extremely silly. It was with full knowledge of what they were letting themselves in for, that the comrades had thrown in their lot with this movement and faced third degree torture at the hands of the police. They accepted their fate, living behind bars year after year. But were these men, who were the most progressive members of their society, able to treat equally those who had joined them in this declaration of war? Were they able to give an equal measure of respect to their fellow women compatriots?

I have said at the very outset that I have no intention of minutely examining the theory and practice of this movement. But the one thing that comes to mind constantly, the one thing that I have repeatedly commented on in several places, is that women have not managed to reach the stage of decision-making be it at home or in the world at large. The communist party was formed in the second decade of the 20th century. But never in the party has a woman received the same status and respect as a man. The Naxalites left the older parties in order to come together and set up the CPI-ML with a new outlook. They aroused trust and hope in the minds of the people. Women, too, came forward to join a movement that was so full of promise. Taken up with fighting against a system, I never realised when I entered the realm of a completely different struggle. At that time I did not appreciate how necessary this struggle was. But today I feel that if all of us had continued and sustained it, we women would have stood side by side with the men and had an equal say in decision-making. Perhaps the history of the Naxalbari movement would have been written differently then.

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